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ABSTRACT

Three students in an autobiography class--an African-American, a woman, and a gay man struggling to come out--used their writing to both affirm their places in the world and envision another place. Having reviewed her early educational experiences as an African-American, Holly focused her essay back to her present college days and her attempts to find new role models. She wrote in a lyrical woman's style, one suggesting that although the struggle may be difficult, it can be beautiful. Jackie took a sweeping look at the position of women in society. While both Jackie and the teacher acknowledged that her scope limited her essay's depth, the teacher came to understand the rhetorical motivation for her choice. Jackie ended her essay in a light, optimistic tone. Mitch wrote the most personally revealing, most agonizing essay about coming to terms with his gayness. The essay's power was due to the simplicity and directness of the language. Toward the end of his narrative, Mitch began to see the possibility that he might indeed be able to live a fulfilling life as an openly gay man. In each of the three essays, the writers took important steps toward reconsidering their pasts (revisioning) while imagining a better future (envisioning). Autobiographical writing can be included in required composition courses so that students can represent and examine their complex identities and imagine better futures. (RS)

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"Writing as Envision: Autobiographical and Academic Writing
in the Composition Class"

As Robert Brooke says "...learning to write is but one part of the larger problem of negotiating identity in a complex social world."¹ For many, especially, minorities broadly defined, this negotiation has in part occurred through autobiographical writing. Consider, for example, Adrienne Rich's many essays and her book Of Women Born, works that bear witness to situations our patriarchal culture denies and envision alternatives. There are many facets to being able to negotiate identity. In addition to identifying with one's race, class, gender, etc., one has to deal with his or her specific identity: that is, deal with sentiments such as those expressed by Maxine Hong Kingston in The Woman Warrior, "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand the things in you that are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories from what is Chinese?" Kingston never answers the question, but her narrative gives a sense of how different aspects of identity interact. Since autobiographical writing represents particular problems of the intersection of class, gender, family etc., it can help students not only understand their pasts but also envision different

1. Mary Louise Bailey Meissner, "Reclaiming Personal Knowledge: Investigations of Identity, Difference, and Community in College Education," College English 55 (Feb 1993): 214.

futures for themselves. Also, it can help students in the classroom appreciate diversity by representing different cultures, classes etc. but also representing particular identities of minorities.

In this paper I will examine how three students from my autobiography class--an African-American, a woman, and a gay man struggling to come out--used their writing to both affirm their places in the world and envision another place.² My analysis is informed by two recent critical discussions on personal writing. The first is a recommendation made in a College English article reconsidering expressivism urging composition theorists to frame the debate between social constructivists and expressivists in terms of actual classroom practice.³ The second is Nancy Miller's Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts in which she advocates autobiographical criticism as a way to get around the limitations of identity criticism or "writing as a."⁴ Later, I will balance my praise for these autobiographical narratives with the realization that this kind of writing is often forced out of composition classes and with some suggestions for incorporating it in the "academic" curriculum.

II

Holly titled a lyrical essay "Let It Be," and for some time it was unclear from where the title had come. The narrative began with Holly, an African-American, at the opening day picnic at the small private college where I teach. Holly's enjoyment of her new surroundings was cut short when a student angrily demanded "When are you going to bring out

2. I am hampered however, by the fact that I do not have any of the student essays in front of me; I asked each of the students to give me copies of the papers, offering to change names and or credit them, as they wished, but each student lost papers or forgot. This itself is important information.

3. Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy, "Is Expressivism Dead? Reconsidering Its Romantic Roots and Its Relation to Social Constructivism." College English 54 (Nov. 1992): 647-661.

4. Routledge: NY & London, 1991.

more catsup?," thus betraying the white student's racism and clueing Holly in to the many challenges she would face in her new environment. The essay then shifted back to her childhood, depicting Holly's efforts to understand herself and her education in the context of being an African-American. Her efforts were complicated by her divorced parents being very different people--Dad, carefree, content to live in a housing project and enjoy small pleasures; Mom--upwardly mobile, status-conscious, wanting her daughter solidly in the middle class. As the custodial parent, her mother had the major influence in Holly's life, getting her gifted daughter into the best schools and unearthing every possible opportunity. When Holly would notice or experience discrimination, her mother would scoff it off "let it be": in effect telling her daughter get the education, make a better life for yourself and let well enough alone.

Having reviewed her early educational experiences and attempts to negotiate her relationships with her two very different parents, Holly focused her essay back to her present college days. At Goucher, she was without the role models⁵--parents, ministers, older African-Americans--so Holly sought new ones. She found some among the cooking and cleaning staff, and was inspired when one food service worker, Lucy, who made barely enough to pay her bills threatened to call the NAACP if certain working conditions were not improved. By the end of the essay Holly cycled back to not wanting to "let it be" but wanting to challenge the status quo. She decided to be like Lucy--not like her middle class mother or her apolitical father--but to imitate those who fight injustice. In doing so, she did not reject her mother's aspirations for a better life. Rather she envisioned life as an activist with middle class security.

5. There are no black and only oen minority at this college. Recently an older African-American student reported on behalf of the Black Student Association to Faculty Chairs that the students were turning to her and to a member of the housekeeping staff for guidance.

In style as well as content Holly challenged: she did not write in a style I nor I suspect any of her other teachers taught her, but rather in a lyrical women's style, one suggesting that although the struggle may be difficult, it can be beautiful.

My next student, Jackie, usually wrote about women's concerns. Unlike Holly, who focused specifically on her own life, Jackie took a sweeping look at the position of women in society, covering everything from sexual harassment (a female co-worker purportedly was pressured into sleeping with the boss) to inequities in education to the negative impact of fairy tales. After reviewing the general situation of women, Jackie often inserted her own experiences or thoughts into the essay. While Jackie and I both acknowledged that her scope limited her essay's depth, I came to understand the rhetorical motivation for her choice: In Jackie's mind, there was no way to separate the various components of women's oppression. Also, before coming to college Jackie had few opportunities to discuss women's issues. Having found a possible audience, Jackie was almost unable to contain herself.

At times, her essay read as much like a research paper as an autobiographical piece: there were numerous statistics from women's studies classes. In addition to serving the rhetorical function of proving her point, these statistics and the general "social science" feel of Jackie's paper collapsed the distinction between expository and autobiographical writing, between the social sciences, arts, and humanities. While Jackie probably included these statistics to "prove her point," as good students do, she was also personally evoking them, stating how as a woman she was barraged by the variety of discrimination she faced. And in a sense her essay mirrored the aspirations of women's studies programs in being interdisciplinary and perhaps echoed some of their goals in collapsing artificial categories.

As a working-class and urban woman, Jackie was particularly afraid of street violence: she has, after all, had to accept employment at night, in fast food places, and other situations that made her vulnerable. Once, she narrowly escaped gang rape, and was

highly upset when co-workers (male and female) questioned her about her clothes and behavior. The painful lesson she learned and I learned again is that women can be as sexist as men. Also, she suggested that many well-meaning middle-class women were unaware of the degree of danger in working-class and poor women's lives, a problem borne out by some research.⁶ Some of Jackie's other work that semester further illustrates the prevalence of violence in her life. In one essay Jackie tells of her father's having abandoned them when she was three and her mother's then moving them into the home of the physically abusive grandfather. Jackie and her mother are periodically beaten by the men on whom her mother is financially and emotionally dependent. One of them, her stepfather, discourages the mother from supporting Jackie's applications to colleges, "Why can't she just get married? She'll probably just get knocked up in her first semester."

But at the end of the essay on being a woman-- after she surveys the disasterous landscape for women-- Jackie ends her paper "I've been knocked down a lot, but I'm still in the game." Though I and the class found the ending a bit cliché, we appreciated Jackie's determination to go on and her apparent attempt to take a lighter, optimistic look at the serious problems confronting women. And we admired the implicit suggestion that perhaps she could win the game.

The final student, Mitch, wrote the most personally revealing, most agonizing essay. About a week before the paper was due he told me that he didn't want this particular paper discussed in class. He turned it in without his name typed in the upper left hand corner as is usual, but with the name "Mitch" penciled in lightly. His essay began: "I first had sex with a male when I was eight years old." After describing his sexual experiences with his twelve year old friend (and concluding that these relations did not constitute child abuse),

6. For some discussion of this problem see Pat Belanoff, "Language: Closings and Openings" in Michelle M. Tokarczyk and Elizabeth A. Fay, ed. Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory. Amherst: UMass Pr., 1993, 251-75.

Mitch related his efforts to squelch his sexual desire for men. In the small town Southern community where he grew up there were no openly gay men and many people expressed strong disapproval of gays and lesbians. Mitch tried, his essay indicted, every possible "cure" for his gayness: He slept with different women (a particularly poignant description, something to the effect of "I say I made love to them, but you could never call what I did with women making love.") to getting on his knees at night and begging God to "remove his lust for men," promising to be a minister and dedicate himself to God's service if God would only "help" him. The style is the American plain style, short sentences that attempt to render the truth of what happened and what he felt at particular times, and keeping speculation to a minimum. The essay's power was in fact largely due to the simplicity and directness of the language.

Toward the end of his narrative Mitch expresses the realization that nothing can change his gayness. At this same point, he begins to see the possibility that he might indeed be able to live a fulfilling life as an openly gay man. This possibility is more fully developed in his novel in progress, begun while taking my class. In this fictional work, a young man comes to terms with his gayness when he begins college and develops a relationship with a young man he met at summer camp. The two remain together throughout college, eventually break the news to their families, who first reject their sexual orientation but finally come to terms with it. Later, the young couple open a bookstore cafe featuring gay and lesbian literature (for which, incidentally, Mitch had scoured local stores).

While praising the novel's direct prose and ambitions, I pointed out to Mitch that it would be unusual for two people to meet in high school and have a relationship that lasted through college into adulthood. Mitch, looking somewhat puzzled, replied that in his town few people had attended college, and most people married those they'd dated for years in high school. Here I realized that Mitch's expectations of a gay relationship then were further complicated by the particular kind of heterosexual relationship he had seen. By his

town's standards, at twenty-five he was years past the normal age for "settling down" with one person. He said he'd rethink his characters' relationships, and in doing so I think he will imagine some possibilities for himself.

In each of the works discussed then the writers take important steps toward reconsidering their pasts (revisioning) while imagining a better future (envisioning). And each of them complicates issues of race, gender and sexual orientation by depicting intersections of race and family dynamics, class and gender, sexual orientation and regional background, etc. In this sense they accomplish what Nancy Miller describes as "...autobiography in its *performance as text* complicates the meaning and reading of social identity, and hence of the writing subject."⁷ Thus the student narratives avoid the pitfalls of "as a" work, criticism as a latina, woman, etc., work that represents the writer as part of the category without regard for factors that make him/her unique.

Because autobiographical papers force us to see the writers as complex individuals, they are less likely than more "objective" work to provoke knee-jerk responses from hostile students. In a required composition class with required objective assignments, I acutely felt the lack of autobiographical material and the responses it engenders. The chosen reader was considered left of center, which alienated many of the conservative students. The alienation was intensified, I think, because the left-wing students were often seen solely as representatives of their groups. The extremely bright African-American student, for example, was seen as just an African-American espousing the party line. The "sixtyish" Jewish woman was seen as a proponent of sixties values. Neither of these students was seen as a unique individual in the way that Holly, Jackie, and Mitch were in their writing.

7. Nancy Miller, Getting Personal, 135)

Because my college has dropped its second level composition course and teachers must now teach exposition, summary, argument, critical reading and thinking, research and, yes, other skills in one semester, we have been forced to drop personal papers from our syllabus. As an untenured, relatively young faculty member working in a politically charged and complex environment, I cannot now alter this situation. I can, however, make some important modifications to my classes.

One is to give frequent freewriting assignments in which students respond personally to issues raised in readings. Possibly, these writings could be compiled toward the end of the semester and another student could write a profile of this student, if both parties agreed.⁸ Another possibility is requiring students to do in class writings, whose use is usually to check for plagiarism and make sure students have some ability to write under pressure, on personal issues. Finally, there is a possible variation on the dialectical notebook: On one side of the page, students could write notes on the articles themselves, on the other they might write about experiences themselves or others they know have had that remind them of the articles. Each of these possible solutions would still have the problem of not being one of the main factors in the grade, but they would nonetheless give the students some voice and some possibility to envision things beyond the issues and problems discussed in the classroom.

Contemporary literary writing is influenced by postmodernist and feminist collapsing of categories, autobiographical impulses, and skepticism about objective reality. If possible, we should try to write assignments and develop programs that incorporate these features. If we are not in positions to change the status quo, however, we should try to give

8. The use of autobiographical material is very sensitive and raises many ethical issues. For one see Susan Swartzlander et al, "The Ethics of Requiring Students to Write About Their Personal Lives," Chronicle of Higher Education 17 Feb 1993, B1-2.

supplemental assignments that will enable students to represent and examines their complex identities and imagine better futures. Even if we are stuck in present problems, there is no reason why we and our students cannot imagine better futures.